

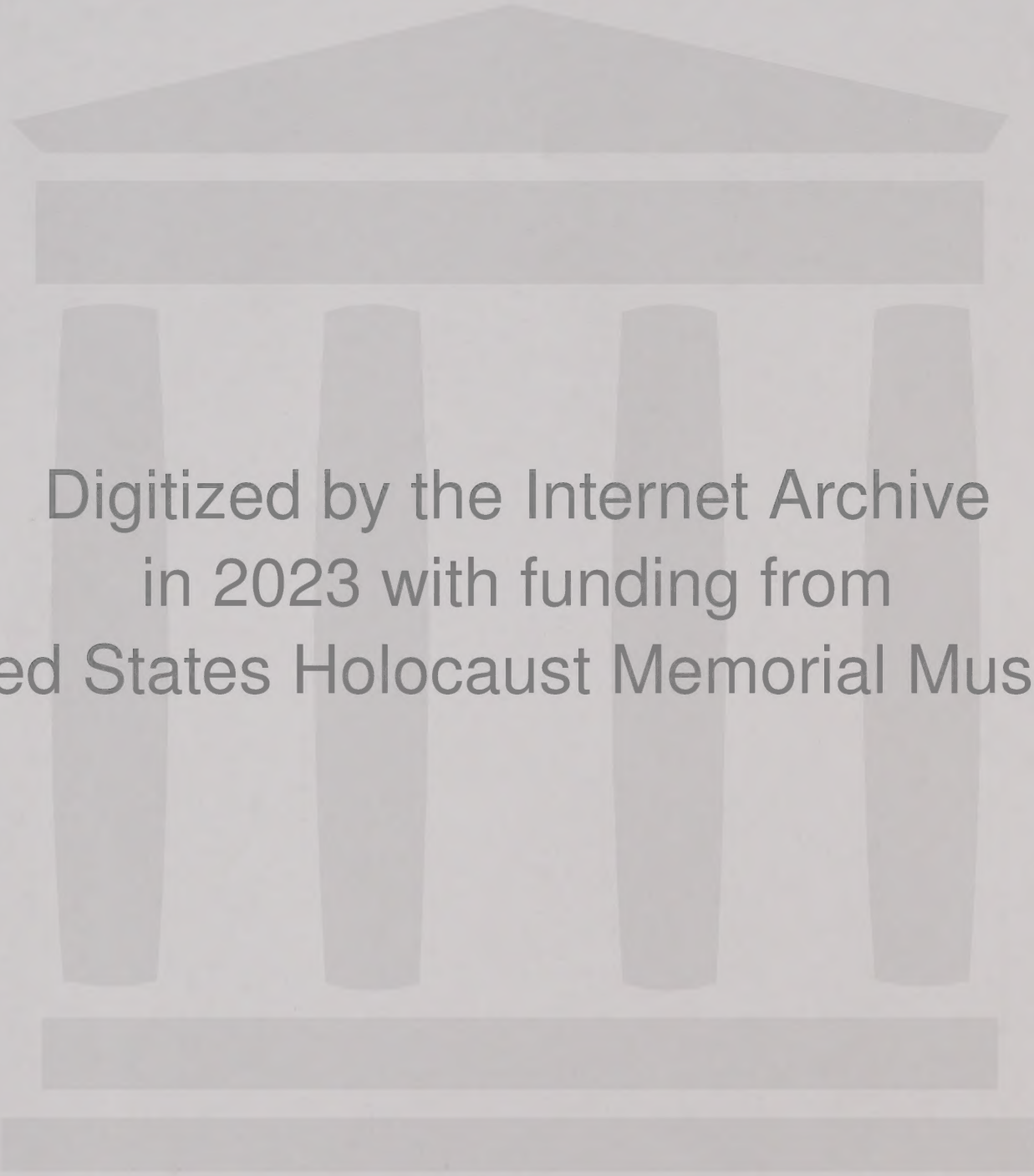


ועידת התביעות
Claims Conference
Conference on Jewish Material Claims
Against Germany

Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

Access to the print and/or digital copies of memoirs in this collection is made possible by USHMM on behalf of, and with the support of, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum respects the copyright and other intellectual property rights associated with the materials in its collection and makes good faith efforts to determine the copyright status of such materials. The Museum has a good faith belief that the materials in this collection may be made publicly available. The Museum welcomes additional information about copyright status. If you have additional information or concerns about the copyright ownership of materials in this collection, please contact the Museum's Library by phone at 202-479-9717 or by email at reference@ushmm.org.



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2023 with funding from
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

<https://archive.org/details/bib292099>

AND, I WENT BACK
[to the death camp]
AFTER FIFTY-SEVEN YEARS

"Now for many years, I wanted to go back to the death camp that I was in. Finally, I did it. I knew that it would be emotional. I knew it would be a very hard emotion on me. But, I felt that I have to do it," explained Sia Hertsberg to Donna Gulley, on Wednesday, September 18, 2002.

Sia is my neighbor and "sometimes mother". Sia is many people's "sometimes mother" because she is the epitome of a mensch: she believes in helping people and being good to people. At the same time, she wants to be sure that my generation and those to come ***should not forget***: Sia is a Holocaust survivor. Knowing Sia and her story has enriched my life: may yours be enriched as well.

Spielberg's crew interviewed Sia: she has the film used in that interview and made an additional one that augments Spielberg's. Family photos and footage of Sia's current home were added so that she could tell, even more fully than Spielberg's interview was able to, the impact of her experience.

A while back, Sia told me "Many years ago when I saw Schindler's List, I knew that I must start talking about my experience during World War II." Prior to seeing that movie, Sia had been silent, trying to let the pain heal. With her new understanding that she wanted to be a part of the assurance that ***no one should forget***, she began thinking that someday she would like to make a return trip.

"About ten years ago," Sia continues, "Adam Macuba, my Polish friend, went to the Stutthof Museum and made a video with his camera to show me how Stutthof looks today. He introduced himself to Janina Grabowska-Chalka, the museum's manager and asked if she had some documents about me. He was able to get all three original papers (for me, my sister and my mother) that were signed by each of us.

When I got these papers, it was a one-week nightmare. It was then that I decided that I had to go back to see Stutthof myself, to find out about the death march, and to find the other camp (Burggraben), to find the school that was used as a hospital, and to find the hill behind the school where my sister and all the other liberated survivors who died in the hospital were buried."

Sia had this return trip scheduled several times. Finally, this summer, it worked for her to go. Fortunately, Adam and his wife, Bogumila (Mila) were there to be her guide, companion and support. They went every step of the route with her.

So now, as Sia tells me (you - all of us) the story of her return trip, she says: "I came to Poland. My Gentile Polish friends, Adam and Mila - young, in their very early

forties, and very nice, met me at the airport. They took me off the plane and from then I was with them until they put me on the plane back. They live in Tarnov and we started there.

First we went to Krakow. There are only 200 Jewish people in Krakow, even though it was a Jewish town before World War II. There are few synagogues. We went to a service at one of the synagogues that has survived. It was right next to where Schindler's List was filmed

And then we started out to Gdansk (Dancig in German) to the camp Stutthof. "

At this point, Sia begins to reflect on where it all began 57 years ago. She tells me, "I came to the camp with my mother and my little sister, Margo, on October 3, 1944, having left Riga on September 24th. We were transferred from TVL (Truppen Wirtschaft Lager) on a boat from Riga to Dancig. Everybody, who survived, remembers the terrible trip on this boat: no lavatories; no food [can you believe it?]. In Stutthof, we were admitted in Block 19. To keep our family together, we altered information about our ages and abilities: the very young and the very old did not stand a chance; adults, especially those with skills, had a better chance of surviving. The condition in Stutthof was terrible. I have told of this before and will tell it again later."

And now after 57 years, Sia returns.

I hear Sia, emotionally, on a tape that she made on her return trip: "Coming close to Stutthof - it is July, 23, 2002, a Tuesday. Too much excited. I feel like throwing up. Very scary. It seems very scary to me. Coming closer. I miss my children, I miss my grandchildren, and I miss very much Simon [her 20 year companion who died much too recently - she is crying.] Adam and Mila (Bogomila) support me very much and they are beautiful people but I do miss my children, really. I see the fence and I remember how they were taking us. I was holding my little sister's hand and my mother was on the other side. They were taking us there and taking everything away from us: they were undressing us and taking our clothes, shoes, everything. They gave us the striped suits and wooden shoes to wear. I saw it all in my mind again and [I] was crying and missing my children at my side - maybe next-time," Sia suggests, hopefully. "So [now]," she continues, "we are walking. On my right side is a forest and on the left side is the camp. I don't recognize it - I don't recognize anything. It is very different from the way it was in 1944. Today, there are flowers and trees planted at the gates."

Oh my: phew... let us all catch our breath...

Sia continues telling about her return trip: "I was sitting for more than 3 hours with Janina, the manager of the Stutthof Museum: I found out a lot of things, especially about the death march, that I did not remember. I bought two films to bring home

that tell of those things (one in Polish and one in English). "Now, " Sia explains, "I can straighten out (the story), in my mind, because before I didn't know it as well."

Sia continues her account, "And now I understand how hard it was to make the death march. It was far away and it was winter. It was very cold and there was a lot of snow. We had to walk the entire way except for going over the Visla by ferry. Margo froze her toes, right at the beginning. She told me she could not march any more: I kept making her go on and on. [Sia's mother was not with them. She died after a German soldier kicked her in the head – another horrible Holocaust story.]

Leaving the museum and the kindness of Janina, Sia speaks of the next part of her return trip, "Now, we are driving on the road where I was marched on the death march. It was a 50 kilometer march: 50 kilometers is a real good death march. I was told in Stutthof, at the museum, that only 15% survived the death march." This is why it is so important for all of us to take advantage of the survivors' stories.

Sia continues when they get to the line for the car ferry to cross the Visla River. She says, "We will make some more kilometers but I don't think that we will make it all the way to the other camp, Burggraben (now called Kokoszki), because it is too far. We will go back to the hotel and tomorrow we will go the other way to see Burggraben and then we will go to the place where the hospital [school turned into a hospital] was. The Russians placed all the liberated people in this hospital because none of us were able to stand on our feet. I was close to 18 years old and my weight was 25 kg [a little more than 50 pounds]. My sister Margo was ten and had gangrene in her legs. At the Stutthof Museum, I was told that the Russians burned the camp Burggraben down after the liberation because of the lice and the unsanitary conditions."

As Sia was waiting on this return trip to go over the Visal River, she had a piece of salmon that was grilled fresh before her: what a contrast from the last trip where she hungered without even a piece of bread or drink of water...

A short while after crossing the river, Sia and her Polish companions returned to the hotel: she was exhausted from her emotional journey. The next day they began again.

Sia continues her return story: "Today is July 24, 2002. We continue the trip where my sister and I marched in 1945. The road is a narrow - it is a two-way road with houses on one side some of the time. I don't remember the road at all. It has been moved and completely redone. There are new houses. And, as you can imagine, it is impossible for me to remember the road because of the condition I was in. I had typhus, and was taking my ten-year-old sister, who had the frostbite in her legs, by the hand. We were able to find the road only because it had been very clearly pointed out to us in the Stutthof Museum. We will finish the road today.

Sia continues, telling about the death march: "We slept over twice which I don't remember. She [the museum director, Janina] told us that the march took 3 days, that we slept in the snow, and that we walked day and night." (Sia thought it was a much

shorter march and was surprised to learn that it was a three day march!) " I know *now* that we slept in the snow: this is how my sister got the gangrene from frostbite: from wet, too small leather boots which she was allowed to keep instead of switching to the wooden shoes that the rest of us had because she was so pretty and so young. Very close to Kokoszki (Burggraben) is the place where they wanted to shoot us."

Sia reminds me at this point that she and her sister did not finish the entire death march. When Margo was absolutely unable to continue and Sia could not push her any harder, they stopped and laid in a ditch: perhaps to hide; perhaps to be shot. A German soldier did look right at them and, then, shot in the air and left!

When they were sure he was gone, Sia and Margo left the ditch. They made it across the street by crawling on all fours (weak, to be sure). The Polish people in the first house they went to were afraid to keep them, even though Sia assured them she had access to United States money. They gave them some food and showed them how to get to a camp.

Sia told me that, in her return trip, as they drove the road, they stopped to talk to people, in hopes of finding someone who could identify the house where she and her sister had been given food and shown how to get to the camp. Every one they encountered was younger than Sia so none had a memory of that time.

So, the next stop was at the camp Burggraben where Sia and her sister had gone instead of trying other houses. When Sia and her sister stumbled into this camp 57 years ago, they were in poor health, sick from the smell of the food they had been offered at the first house after having been so long without anything to eat, exhausted, and frightened. A bed of straw (full of lice) was the best the camp could offer them. Sia and her sister collapsed in the lice filled bed and spent, perhaps days, listening to moaning and not being able to get themselves up. On March 23, 1945 the Russians came with liberation and they were saved.

To find Burggraben, the camp where Sia and her sister were liberated, look on a map for *Kokoszki*. That is what Burggraben is called today. It is about 50 kilometers west from Stutthof to Kokoszki (Sia's Burggraben).

Returning to Burggraben, Sia found a monument but no museum as she had found at Stutthof. She describes her return visit, "We got to look around at the concentration camp. It is a very huge place and there is left only one part. It is where they were dumping the water for the camp. It is very large: it is a huge, huge place all around with wires. The wires are still there but nothing else: there is nothing inside or outside that you can see."

The monument is a rather small stone with some fresh flowers that people have placed around it. The inscription, in Polish, translates as follows:

*Forever glory and remembrance
for all prisoners of Stutthof death camp in Kokoszki
who were tortured and killed by the Nazi people killers
in the years of 1944-1945.bb*

When the Russians liberated the prisoners at Bruggraben, health, sanitation, and life became the issue for all who were liberated. Sia, Margo and the others were undressed, shaved, and asked their sex (they were so emaciated that the sex could not even be distinguished). They were taken to the hospital that the Russians had made out of a nearby school.

The museum director, Janina, had made calls to a few elderly people who might remember the school (hospital) where Sia and her sister were taken. She wanted to be sure that Sia could easily find it. Langfurt (the city) is now called Gdansk Wrzeszcz and Falkweig (the street) is Topolowa. The original names stayed in Sia's mind for all 57 years. Janina, the museum manager, discovered the current names when she talked, first, to a 90 years old man who remembered the school and, then, to the person he suggested who knew the names that the city and road are called today. Both confirmed that the school was still there.

Sia was very excited that she was going to go to see the school (hospital) where she began her recuperation and place where her little sister died and was buried.

They did find the big school. The sign on the front of the school, today, identifies it as *Liceum IB 1309 World School*. "All the survivors of Buggraben were brought here," Sia reminds us. "Many of them died in the hospital. And that is where Margo died."

Sia begins to get very excited as she sees the hill where Margo was buried. On the tape, I hear her, "And there is right like I remembered like I was telling always: uhhhh, a little like a not a mountain but a, uh, like a mountain." Sia is so fraught with emotion that English words fail her at this point: she later remembers that hill is the word she wants to use to describe the place where her sister and the others who died in the hospital after the liberation were buried. The hill is there, behind the school, and the woods around it are there but there are no memorial markers.

"And I do remember this place," Sia reminisces, "because a couple of weeks after my sister, Margo, died, they took me on a stretcher up on the hill: yes, a little hill - not a mountain. [Sia remembers the word she wanted.] They took me to that hill and they showed me the place where there was a little piece of wood stuck in the ground and on it was written Margo Israilevitch, born October 3, 1934, died April 21, 1945. There was a lot more people than Margo that died in the hospital and they all had sticks on the hill, too, telling their name, the date of their birth, and the date of their death."

Sia continues telling about visiting the school, "When we got to the school, we talked to a woman who worked there. She did not remember ever seeing the sticks in the hill but was kind enough to ask some other, older people if they remembered. One

person did not remember and the next person who was working in the schoolyard reacted very strongly. He said that he did not know anything about the Jews and that he did not want to know anything about them. This was the first anti-Semitism that I encountered in my return trip. You know from my telling about Krakow that the Jews have left Poland for the most part. Certainly, they left for good reason.

We asked the woman if we could go to the hill and she said we could: the only way to get there was through the back door of the school. As we were going out the door, the anti-Semitic angrily questioned the woman at the school as to why she let us go to the hill. In spite of that, we continued to the hill.

We had to return through the school after visiting the hill to return to our car. During our disappointing visit to the hill, which confirmed that there were no markers for my sister or the others who died in the hospital, we cut our time short so that we would get back to the school before it closed. As we approached there were two older teens who threatened us with sticks. I was very hurt and frightened by all of these events and sadly left the school. This was the end of my visit: I spent the next three days feeling ill.

Sia takes a deep breath and concludes, "It was very hard on me to make this visit and I knew that it would be but I was glad I did it.

As you know, seeing Schindler's List made me know that I must start talking about my experience during World War II and it planted the seed for a return visit." Helping people, being good to people, being a mench was no longer enough. Sia took on the additional responsibility of seeing to it that we never forget the Holocaust. To ensure remembrance, there must be stories and memorials.

"I am very very upset," Sia explains, " that at the hill behind the school there is not even one marker to identify that this is the place where my sister and the other liberated death camp survivors who died in the hospital were buried. Maybe someone could help me see to it that a marker is placed there in order that they are not forgotten. I would be grateful if someone would do this.

It is important for the survivors of the Holocaust (fewer and fewer by the day) to tell, retell and update the story of our experiences. We should remember and commemorate those who suffered and died with memorials and markers. We need to make these efforts permanent reminders so that the generations to come **will not forget** and that this sad fate will never be repeated. I will continue to look for opportunities to tell my story and I encourage other survivors to do the same."

